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V CORPS LIEUTENANT EARNS SILVER STAR FOR LEADING THE WAY IN BA'QUBAH BATTLE

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BA'QUBAH, Iraq — After leading his platoon through a fierce onslaught, enemy fire pounding them from every direction, 1st Lt. Neil Prakash went back in for more.

His actions on that June day brought Maj. Gen. John R.S. Batiste, commander of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division, to Forward Operating Base Scunior here to award the 24-year-old tank platoon leader with the 2nd Battalion, 63rd Armor one of the military's highest honors -- the Silver Star Medal.

"An incredible officer, his accomplishments on 24 June are clearly heroic," said Batiste.

"He sets a very high standard for every one of us. I guarantee veterans of the past are standing very tall right now."



SGT KIMBERLY SNOW

1st Lt. Neil Prakash, a tank platoon leader from the 2nd Battalion, 63rd Armor of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division, is congratulated by battalion Commander Lt. Col. Jeffrey Culp after being awarded the Silver Star Medal at Forward Operating Base Scunior, Iraq January 14

Although he was born in India and maintains strong ties to the Indian community, Prakash was raised in Syracuse, N.Y., in what he calls a very patriotic American household.

An ROTC cadet at Johns Hopkins University, he planned to attend medical school like his mother, father and older brother -- all doctors. But after attending an ROTC branch orientation during his senior year, he knew what he was meant to do.

"There was this colonel, he was armored cav, so he had a Stetson and spurs," said

Prakash. "He was standing on his tank and he was like, 'All right, listen up, you (expletive). If you want 72 tons of pure power underneath you...' and he just went off."

Prakash says he made up his mind on the spot and has never regretted it since.

After spending all night June 23 and the next morning patrolling and setting up observation posts, Prakash's 1st platoon pulled in to FOB Scunion at about 10 a.m.

"Capt. Fowler came sprinting over, all out of wind, and says, 'All right, the whole company is going into Ba'qubah,'" said Prakash. "'I've just been given the order. Ba'qubah is under siege -- the police station, the (Civil Military Operations Center) all have been attacked. So we're going in.'"

By 10:45 a.m. the company had geared up and was maneuvering south into Ba'qubah with Prakash's 1st platoon in the lead. They were to seize and secure a set of twin bridges and set up a blocking position to prevent the enemy from reinforcing.

As they advanced toward their objective, they began receiving reports of enemy activity in the city. Four-man rocket-propelled grenade teams had been spotted on rooftops, as well as dismounted enemy infantry in alleyways. They were told to expect improvised explosive device and RPG ambushes by a well-trained enemy who meant to stand and fight.

"This was the first time I even got a little bit nervous ... since I got here," said

Prakash. "I just got this weird feeling. Everything was silent. There was no movement.

And then, all of the sudden, something blew up behind me."

It took the crew about one hour to fight their way through the next one-kilometer stretch of road. Official battle reports count 23 IEDs and 20-25 RPG teams in that span, as well as multiple machine gun nests and dismounted enemy forces armed with small arms and hand grenades.

Because the dismounted enemy was attempting to throw hand grenades into the tank's open hatches, Prakash ordered the tanks to "open protected mode," leaving them open only a crack.

As the lead vehicle, Prakash's tank took the brunt of the attack, blasted by multiple IEDs and at least seven standard and armor-piercing RPGs. The enemy fired mainly at the lead tanks, aiming for their few vulnerable spots. One round blew the

navigation system completely off of the vehicle, while another well-aimed blast disabled its turret.

Although unable to rotate the turret, Prakash continued in the lead, navigating with a map and maneuvering his tank so it could continue engaging the enemy with the main weapon system and its .50-caliber machine gun. He watched as men on rooftops sprayed down at his tank with machine guns and small arms.

"I just remember thinking, 'I hope these bullets don't go in this one inch of space,'" said Prakash. "Looking out the hatch, I'm spraying guys and they're just falling. They would just drop -- no blood, no nothing. We just kept rolling, getting shot at from everywhere."

The platoon was finally ordered to turn around and head back north to maintain contact with the enemy and establish a defensive perimeter while allowing a recovery team to retrieve a downed vehicle.

Prakash took the opportunity to move his tank back to FOB Scunion for repairs and provide escort for medical evacuations. After assisting with repairs, he and his crew immediately moved back into position and requested to resume the lead.

Moving south back through the city, they encountered no resistance. Once they neared their objective, however, Prakash identified and engaged an enemy resupply truck, destroying the vehicle and its contents.

"We blasted it with a main round from about 100 meters away. The thing just blew to shreds," he said. "You could see the tubes from the launchers go flying in the air."

The crew then moved to its objective and established a blocking position until they were relieved the following morning.

By battle's end, Prakash's platoon was responsible for 25 confirmed destroyed enemy and an estimated 50 to 60 additional destroyed enemy fighters. Prakash was personally credited with the destruction of eight enemy strong-points, one enemy resupply vehicle, and multiple dismounted enemy fighters.

"He led the way," said Alpha Company Commander Capt. Paul Fowler. "He's a pleasure to command, because he doesn't require very much direction. He uses his own judgment and he's simply an outstanding young lieutenant."

